

Slow shopping

Creating meaningful experiences and relationships

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The following article describes a new concept in consumption, named Slow Shopping, and how it would be applied on retail stores. Slow Shopping is inspired by the Slow movement, a philosophy that rethinks the values of our every-day actions, and proposes a new strategy for clothing consumption, making it more conscious and sustainable. Through rethinking services and how products are displayed in the physical environment, we present a new possibility of store, which provides to users a different experience, aligned with the current need of resources optimization and sustainable businesses in the economic, ecologic and mainly social aspects.

Introduction

This article describes the results obtained during a workshop in the First Sustainable Summer School, an event aiming to bring together stakeholders from around the world to think and reflect about the construction of an ecologically sustainable society. The workshop, called Light Lifestyles and coordinated by Prof. Dr. Brigitte Wolf, aimed at reflection and development of projects that contribute to the changing habits of our daily life, towards a more sustainable society while maintaining individual comfort and life quality.

The reason, both for the event and the workshop, is the urgent need of modern society to revise its operating mechanism so to avoid collapsing. This necessity arose since humanity increased the consumption of natural resources, as if there is available raw material in a quantity equivalent of four planet Earths, even though there is in reality only one. From this perspective, it is impossible that industrial production and resource consumption continue at the current pace. We must find alternatives to the contemporary lifestyle, pointing a way without extreme sacrifices, so that everyone can adopt it gradually and in a natural way. According to Manzini, theoretician on the subject of sustainability, we must learn to live better by consuming less environmental resources. For this, we must introduce systemic changes in our lives. (Manzini, 2006)

However, the routine of the contemporary world requires a high speed, never seen before. All our daily tasks must be performed more quickly and precisely for this reason, the awareness of our actions becomes even more difficult. Doing takes place before thinking and this reflects in the quality of products and services that circulate today.

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Consumption has become almost a mechanical activity. People have no more awareness of what they are buying, or why they are buying it. They do not ask where the products came from, of what they were produced, and most importantly, what ecological footprint they have. The unbridled consumerism not only produces an exaggerated expense of raw materials, but also fosters psychological consequences, such as compensation for personal problems through unreasonable purchases.

Therefore, this article presents a concept that seeks to rethink the act of buying the way it currently exists. Slow Shopping is a new expression, which includes the purchase and sale under the guidelines of the slow movement and proposes new forms of interaction during this experience. Through a store model, we describe a possible application of this concept that could become a viable contribution to the environmental and social needs from our society.

Slow movement and design

The Slow movement emerged as a philosophy of opposition to society's current situation, where everything is constantly accelerating, from work to family life. The beginning of the movement is associated with a demonstration in Rome against the opening of a branch of McDonald's®, an American fast food network, in the 1980s. Carlo Petrini, one of the demonstrators, devoted himself to spreading the concept of Slow Food that, by countering imported and junk food, emphasizes the importance of a natural and conscious diet and the support to local food production. Thereafter, the movement developed demonstrating that the addressed need comprehended not only eating habits, but could be applied to life as a whole.

In the last decade the movement has taken hold and spread to several cities and several areas of daily life. It is possible to find variations of Slow movements for travelling, schools, reading etc. The movement's apex is the creation of Slow Cities (in the original, città slow), a process initiated in Italy, where entire towns are committed to live according to the movement by encouraging activities that promote their dissemination.

It is important to state that, in this context, Slow does not necessarily mean slow in terms of speed. The concept has an intrinsic relationship with life quality. It means slow down so we can meet our basic needs, as the quote in the Box 1 explains:

Box 1: Slow movement philosophy

Source: Prof. Guttorm Fløistad, University of Oslo

The only thing for certain is that everything changes. The rate of change increases. If you want to hang on you better speed up. That is the message of today. It could however be useful to remind everyone that our basic needs never change. The need to be seen and appreciated! It is the need to belong. The need for nearness and care, and for a little love! This is given only through slowness in human relations. In order to master changes, we have to recover slowness, reflection and togetherness.

The search for life quality through proper appreciation and awareness can only happen if we allow the time to do it. That means we need to activate a form of slowness in the society.

The Slow model is of great interest for Design, which covers the development of not only products but also systems and experiences, because it is able to propose successful strategies for social development and well-being. This model has an influence on human relations and suggests the investment of power to local society to improve their life quality; that is, in the Slow model, final users could participate in the chain production at various levels, becoming co-producers. In this sense, we contemplate the contribution that Design can bring to the Slow movement when it creates systems and services with these characteristics.

According to Manzini, bringing together the Slow Food experience and Design opens new opportunities. Meanwhile, Design could create conceptual and operational tools for the Slow model. Thus, both could be contributing to the change in search of a better society.

Slow Shopping

The number of people who comprise the consumer class, that is, the mass that accumulates non-essential goods, is growing rapidly: approximately 2 billion people belong to this class and another billion should be added in the next 10 years (David Butler, 2009). To make it possible to meet these demands without destroying the planet or depleting natural resources, it is necessary to consider new strategies for production, purchase and sale. Greater connection between producer, seller and buyer should be set so as to optimize these new ideas to come.

Slow shopping is a new concept that suggests a new way to buy and sell, through a re-planning of the store as a whole, from the type of offered services and customer relationships to physical environment and concern about the product's origin. Slow Shopping aims to change the current dynamics of consumption, promoting user awareness and rescuing the rhythm which is necessary to understand the product and its necessity in our lives.

The type of product chosen for this proposal was clothing. This is not only due to the big consumption of clothing in all age populations, but also because it is a good that reflects personal identity, a product that people want to choose well because their image depends on it. In addition, clothes have a variable frequency of use depending on the importance they have in the wardrobe. Many pieces stay there for long periods without being used. In fact, most of people do not use 25% of their wardrobe. At the same time we always want to buy more items. This habit goes against the philosophy of sustainability, which proposes a light lifestyle.

Another reason for the large consumption of clothing is the psychological effect of fashion. Users, who are bombarded by messages about how they should dress, feel compelled to constantly update their wardrobe. Because of that, decreasing consumption is not an ideal solution that could easily be applied to society. Alternatively, there are services that seek to encourage the clothing exchange from one's wardrobe, so that a person can take advantage of the less used clothes, replacing them with others. The idea to sell or swap used items is old and provides greater variety at lower cost.

However, this idea needs to be rethought to fit current reality. To make clothes trading a widespread action, it is important to embed it in everyday shopping activity. Some stores offer customers the option of trading clothes, as the American brands Buffalo Exchange® and Out of the Closet® already do. Another service that facilitates such action is offered by the Thred Up® trademark, in which the transaction takes place online and the products are sought and delivered at home. However, the customer can not try the product on, as in buying in person.

Repair of clothing also works very well for increasing the life cycle of raw material, while allowing a personal customization on the product. The work of German designer Kirsten Zimmerman, through the store Mein Einzel-Stück (My Single Piece) is a successful example of this service.

In all of these cases, the systems for buying and selling clothes innovate in the acquisition and production of items, but it takes a little more to step toward the Slow Philosophy. For this, the experience of buying has to be different, starting with the environment, which should be appealing, till the customer engagement process, who musts feel conscious and in control. The popular retail clothing stores are actually in the opposite side. A wealth of clothing, where the atmosphere is cramped and oppressive and cloakrooms are ergonomically flawed. One can not find a single piece, and there is a lack of information about the materials and methods of production of clothing. The stores should be designed according to the desired experience: involving comfort and pleasure, learning and reflection, interaction and customization. For a successful proposal, one must keep in mind not only the principles of the Slow Philosophy as well as issues of a new type of customer, an interactive and aware one.

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Companies are going through a time of resetting values to their target audience. Transparency and accountability are socio-ecological demands of the customer of the future: the sellers must have an engaged discourse, concerned with the production and its consequences for the environment and society. According to the study "The Enterprise of the Future", made by IBM, the consumer of the future is informed and faithful. The key for maintaining customers is the relationship. The survey also mentions that the increasing power of informed consumers can be used positively. Based on this principle, companies can benefit from a co-creation with the user, customizing the experience and providing unique products with personality. This co-creation will allow the formation of a bond of loyalty between consumers and the shop based on customer participation in the construction of their own experience.

Guidelines for setting up Slow Shops

To put into practice the concepts we described above, it is necessary to consider critical issues of service design: how to approach the customer and how to deliver a true experience that inspires people. The success of an enterprise of this kind is the integration of all parties. In order to be consistent from start to finish, the system must be considered holistically. The first step of this proposal is a reconfiguration of services offered by the store. Currently, the role of a clothing store is to constantly bring new options of items to buyers. The store does not usually have any concern about the disposal of the product, either when it is no longer able of being used or when the user no longer wants to own it. It is not the shop's duty to take responsibility for the fate of the products it offers, but this may be an opportunity for innovation in services.

The exchange of products, as described above, is an interesting alternative. For this, the store should encourage the system of selling used clothes, offering professionals and a place for sale. They can earn a percentage of the sale, but also use this material brought by the client as raw material for redesign of new items in order to add value to old clothes.

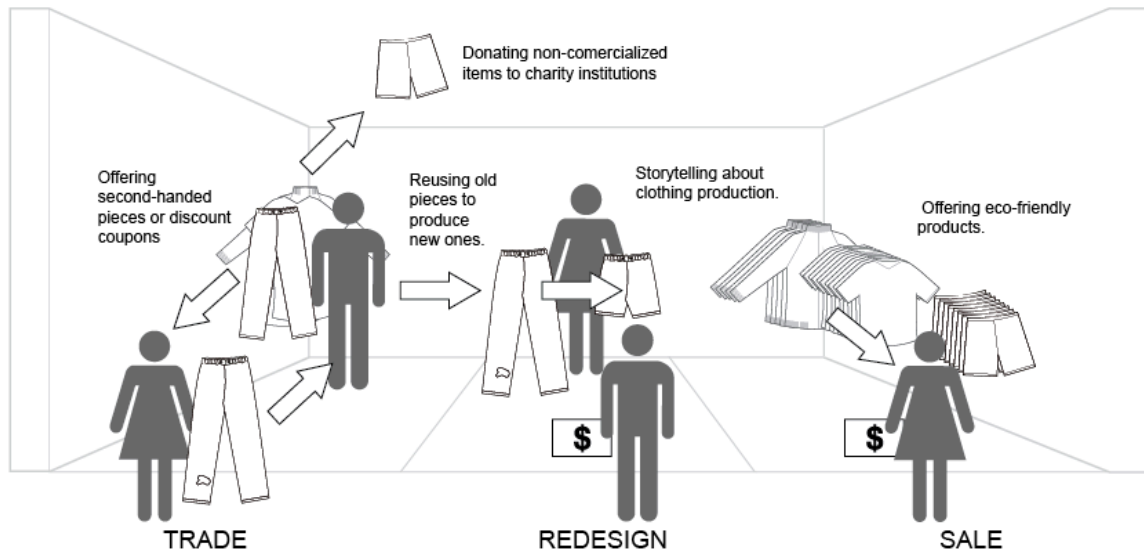
If the client is very fond of a garment that is damaged, they can take it directly to the redesign section and retrieve it, paying only for this specific service. It is important that this section of redesign is open to dialogue with consumers, because the user wants to participate each time more, especially with an item that he will wear, co-creating their own image. To be economically viable to hire professionals only for redesign, it is suggested the recruitment of young professionals or students of fashion, also creating a new mean of integration of these new graduates into the labour market.

It is possible to encourage users to bring more old and used clothes in exchange for discount coupons to buy new or redesigned items. The old outfit is worth in exchange for benefits for the rest of the store. Store employees should know how to evaluate the best destination for the arriving clothes: is it better to sell it directly or to take it to the redesign area? If some pieces are not of interest of the target audience, the store can give them as donation to needy organizations. It is a way of taking social actions, recognized by the aware customer, for a low cost. It is important that this kind of awareness must be also considered in relation to traditional sales. Offering products from socially and environmentally responsible companies is important to be consistent with the Slow thought. Although these products are more expensive, there are each time more people who are willing to pay higher prices for a fairer product.

The combination of these three possibilities of service (Figure 1), which can co-exist and interact mostly among themselves, is the first part of the guidelines for making a slow store. However, other aspects such as reflection and awareness about the products should also be considered.

Figure 1: Services offered in an apparel Slow shop

Source: Light lifestyles workshop, 2009



In order to have an effective change in consumption, people need to be aware of the origin and destination of products before and after use. Understanding the life cycle of a product is the first step for the user to act consciously. Understanding that objects do not disappear or appear from out of nowhere and that everything is the result of transformation can be an inspiring beginning for everyone to rethink their wardrobes and make it more dynamic. The suggestion is that the physical space of the shop is used to bring this learning to their customers.

This can happen attractively through panels with tactile and visual displays, including the telling of stories and facts through multimedia. Consumers need to feel invited to enjoy the products of the store and learn from them, for example, when explaining that the wool comes from livestock and cotton from plants. Whenever possible, participation and customer interaction with these panels should be encouraged. In the area of customization, the history of clothing and its various changes can be documented and assembled from materials provided by customers themselves. Creativity contests and other events like parades and new releases can also be produced in order to attract people and spread the philosophy of the store. All these must be designed so that leaving home for shopping is more than just going and getting a product. The consumer will attend the store, hoping to learn and participate in the process.

The ambiance of the store is also essential to follow the Slow Philosophy. The user experience should be light and pleasant and the ambiance should be based on that. A cozy atmosphere, which is accompanied by soft music and natural elements, invites the customer to stay longer in the store, and thus know all the goods and services. The redesign section should be next to the exchange section, in order to maintain constant dialogue between the two sectors. The user participation in the redesign process can be stimulated by the area and positioning of the elements, to create a common area where the customer can see the clothes being remade, unlike traditional balconies, which sets customer and employee apart.

The cloakroom is an important detail when thinking about comfort in buying clothes. Comfortable furniture for escorts and large mirrors are good steps to create an interesting environment. But the light is crucial in the sense that the user will have to look at themselves in the mirror with the clothes on. The light needs to be closer to the natural one as possible, avoiding the cold light, which makes people pale and less attractive.

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Levels of interaction

A feature of the system described above is the inclusion of users in the marketing process. The services depend on user participation and promote interpersonal relationships face to face. The user can be completely passive, maintaining the current stance of just buying new products, but they should be encouraged to interact, bringing antiques, participating in the creation and customization of the displays. Thus, it stimulates the creativity of the participants, engaging them in constructive activities.

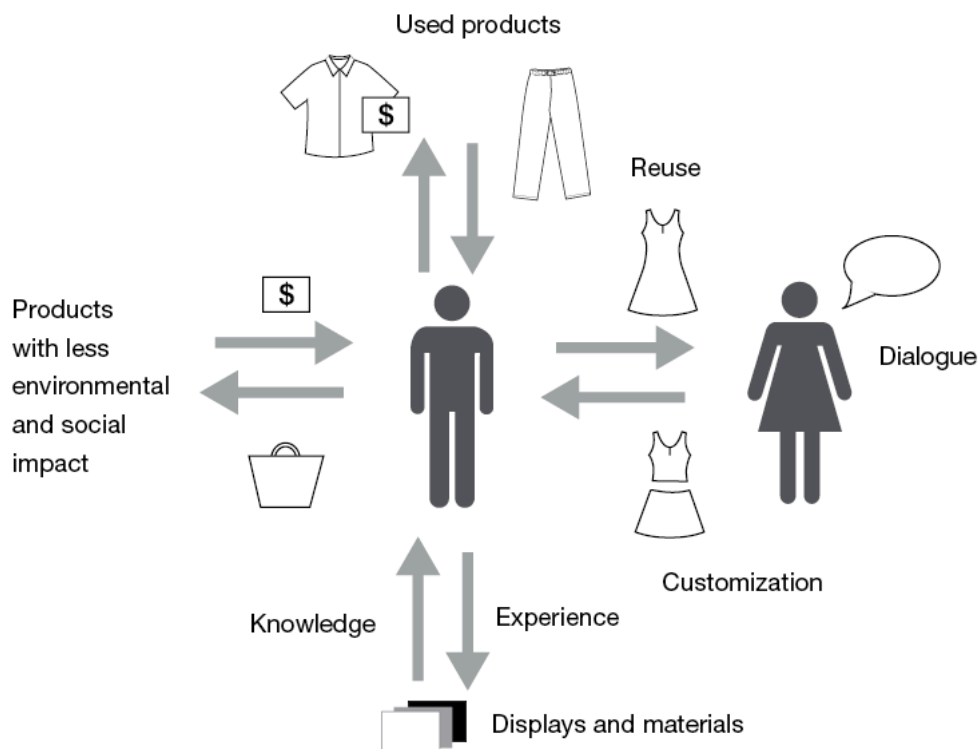
The proposal of creative communities, which use interpersonal relations as an intrinsic part of the service operation, is one of the results obtained by Manzini, in the development of Sustainable Everyday Project. In this proposition, we imagine a company that develops itself based on collective power and gives citizens a chance to turn into active participants in the search and construction of well-being and life quality. However, this is still only a projection into the future and we know that this change must happen gradually, through small changes in local systems.

The design of a Slow Store is very complex and has several levels of interaction simultaneously. The user, a central figure in the next diagram (Figure 2), receives not only physical products as they would in a common shop, but he is also in touch with experience and knowledge about the universe of clothing. Consumers are gradually educated to participate and collaborate, in addition to acquiring awareness of the issues covered in the panels.

The customization part allows flexibility and interaction with professionals who help them to make decisions about their products. The vendor-customer relationship gains several other levels of meaning because the store employee acquires knowledge about the customer's taste. The dialogue is stimulated in the personalized customization. This knowledge can then be used to promote a relationship between the store and consumers by creating a customizable database of clients who are contacted when an item the client wants arrive, or when it fits their profile.

Figure 2: Levels of interaction between customers and the various parts of the system.

Source: Light lifestyles workshop, 2009



It is also important to consider that with the increasing use of the Internet, consumers have gained a new tool, in which they search for information quickly and expose their views and expectations for everyone. Thus, the consumer becomes more demanding and gets a publisher role, as they use the mechanisms of the Internet. This is the time to captivate that customer, who comes to be both a threat and an opportunity for a sustainable mechanism, transposing this new skill to the interests of the store.

Conclusions

The concept of Slow shopping innovates by rethinking the sales activity, when proposes a new store model and contemplates the tripod of sustainability: economy, society and ecology. In the social aspects, there is the development of personal relationships, creating a bond between client and vendors who are able to understand the customer's taste and may recommend clothes and customizations. At the same time, there are other opportunities for learning among consumers, who can understand the system of production and reutilization of products.

On ecological aspects, we find the reduction of natural resources, because there is a decrease in production due to the reuse of materials of old pieces to create new products. Thus, there is less material consumption without reducing the supply of products and their variety. It becomes easier and ecological to change the wardrobe through this system. In addition, the system promotes an awareness of consumers regarding the use of materials and their origin, by investing in the disclosure of such information. In the economic aspect, the store benefits from the reduction of material costs and the socio-ecological responsibility, which currently attracts more consumers, concerned about the issue. This system should promote a reflection on the values of a product, with an emphasis on quality. Customers will also be attracted by the possibility of saving through the exchange of old parts for discount coupons, or even by another piece of clothing.

The establishment model in this paper is formulated to build a new store, however it can be easily implemented into already existing business, gradually and according to the real possibilities of each business. As a suggestion for future development of this research, one can adapt a pre-existing store into this model. The process of user-centred design is essential to implement a model like that, because without the knowledge of the user, one can not establish guidelines for a project that fully depends on the interaction between client, employee, supplier etc.

Of course, these guidelines suggest a path that will be followed by those who want to stand out and are ready to handle a more sophisticated consumer who demands not only quality products, but meaningful experiences. In the future, companies will seek to articulate needs and desires, creating unique products, services and experiences of the kind that users never actually asked, but were exactly what they wanted. Slow shopping plans to offer a unique shopping experience while following the direction of a more conscious and sustainable world.

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